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# Intimate Relationship Status Variations in Violence Against Women: Urban, Suburban, and Rural Differences

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## Abstract

Woman abuse varies across intimate relationship categories (e.g., marriage, divorce, separation). However, it is unclear whether relationship status variations in violence against women differ across urban, suburban, and rural areas. We test the hypothesis that rural females, regardless of their intimate partner relationship status, are at higher risk of intimate violence than their urban and suburban counterparts. Results indicate that marital status is an important aspect of the relationship between intimate victimization and geographic area and that rural divorced and separated females are victimized at rates exceeding their urban counterparts.

## Keywords

National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), nonfatal intimate violence, relationship status, rural

Over 40 years of empirical evidence supports the claim that violence against women is prevalent throughout North America (Basile & Black, 2011). Representative sample survey data elicited by surveys using some version of the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS; e.g., Straus & Gelles, 1986; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) show that at least 11% of North American women in marital/cohabiting relationships are physically abused by their male partners each year (DeKeseredy, 2011b).

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Furthermore, a large literature reveals that a substantial number of women are "unsafe in the ivory tower" (Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2010). Large- and small-scale surveys consistently find that approximately 25% of female undergraduates experience some form of sexual assault each year (DeKeseredy & Flack, 2007).

This is not to say that all North American women are at equal risk of being assaulted by an intimate partner. Some women are at much higher risk than others (Brownridge, 2009). For example, the risk of both lethal and nonlethal violence increases significantly when women want to leave, are trying to leave, are in the process of leaving, or have left a relationship (Brownridge, 2006; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Logan & Walker, 2004). While there is a growing body of social scientific work on woman abuse in rural communities (e.g., Breiding, Ziembroski, & Lynberg, 2009; Gagne, 1992; Logan, Cole, Shannon, & Walker, 2006; Websdale, 1998), it is unclear whether intimate relationship status variations in violence against women in the United States differ across suburban, urban, and rural areas. This article uses aggregate 1992-2005 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data to help fill this research gap.

We hypothesize that regardless of intimate partner relationship status (i.e., violence by a current spouse, former spouse, or a boy/girlfriend), rural females are at higher risk of experiencing intimate violence than are urban and suburban women. This empirically informed assumption is based on the growing body of research on the heightened risk of woman abuse in rural communities (Basile & Black, 2011). For example, DeKeseredy and Schwartz's (2009) exploratory study strongly suggests that separation/divorce assault by an intimate is a major social problem in rural parts of Ohio at least, and their data challenge the notion that rural areas are characterized by a low risk of violent crime. Furthermore, as Websdale (1998) and others (e.g., DeKeseredy, Donnermeyer, Schwartz, Tunnell, & Hall, 2007) point out, there is a system of social practices that generally dominates and oppresses rural and urban females alike, but it operates differently in rural areas. While some men in urban communities report adversarial relationships with police, violent men in rural communities are more likely to be protected by an "ol' boys network" (Websdale, 1998). Certainly, many rural women know that the local police may be friends with their abuser, and officers may refuse to arrest on the grounds of the friendship (DeKeseredy & Joseph, 2006; Zorza, 2002).

In rural sections of the United States and Canada, widespread violence against women exists alongside community norms that prohibit women from publicly talking about their experiences and seeking social support (Brownridge, 2009; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2008; Krishnan, Hilbert, & Pase, 2001; Lewis, 2003). Note, too, that emerging research indicates that one of the key risk factors for violence against women in rural areas is patriarchal male peer support (DeKeseredy, Schwartz, Fagen, & Hall, 2006), which is defined as "attachments to male peers and the resources they provide that encourage and legitimate woman abuse" (DeKeseredy, 1990, p. 130).

While urban abused women encounter many barriers to service, rural women by comparison have fewer social support resources (Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005; Merwin, Snyder, & Katz, 2006), and those that are available cover very large geographic areas (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Logan, Evans, Stevenson, & Jordan, 2005; Logan, Stevenson, Evans, & Leukefeld, 2004). Rural women face additional

barriers, including geographic and social isolation and inadequate (if any) public transportation (Lewis, 2003; Logan et al., 2006). Another factor exacerbating rural women's plight is being uninsured. In fact, rural women are less likely to be insured than are urban and suburban residents (Mueller & MacKinney, 2006; Patterson, 2006), which restricts their access to physical and mental health care services (Basile & Black, 2011).

## Data and Method

### Data

To address this topic, we utilize the NCVS. The NCVS is an ongoing, large, nationally representative survey of households and people aged 12 or older in the United States. The data collection is sponsored by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), and the data are publicly available through the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD). The NCVS is collected using a rotating, stratified, multistage cluster design fielded at a sample of housing units and group quarters in the United States and the District of Columbia (Hubble, 1995; Rennison & Rand, 2007). All persons aged 12 or older in each unit are interviewed. The methodology of the NCVS produces data representative of the noninstitutionalized U.S. population aged 12 or older (Bachman, 2000; Rennison & Rand, 2007), and interviews are conducted both in person and over the phone.

Recently, NCVS data were examined to determine long-term trends in violence against women, but variations in urban, suburban, and rural rates of such violence were not studied (Lauritsen & Heimer, 2008). Intimate relationship status variations in violence were also excluded. Much more research on these topics is needed. As Weisheit, Falcone, and Wells (2006) observe, "There are many unanswered questions about rural domestic violence, including both spouse abuse and child abuse" (p. 181).

### Sample

To examine intimate violence against women by relationship status, the analysis focuses on a sample of nonfatal violent victimizations perpetrated against females aged 12 or older. Nonfatal violent victimizations included are attempted and completed rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault. Our analysis is limited to data from 1992 to 2005. We begin with 1992 data because this is the first year following a major redesign of the NCVS. Combining pre- and post-redesign NCVS data is not recommended as each was gathered using significantly different methods (Rand, 2009; Rennison & Rand, 2007). The year 2005 was selected as the final year included in our analysis again due to methodological concerns. Major methodological changes in the NCVS beginning in 2006 negatively impacted the 2006 data to such a degree that they are not comparable to data from previous years (Truman & Rand, 2010). These changes included the elimination of centralized CATI, a sample reduction, and the inclusion of unbounded surveys in the NCVS. On average, from

1992 to 2005, approximately 99,800 households and 184,100 persons were interviewed annually for the survey. Response rates for this period ranged from 91% to 96% for households and 84% to 94% for individuals. Restricting the sample to 1992-2005, nonfatal victimizations against females results in an overall unweighted sample size of 16,920. In some portions of the analysis, we further restrict our examination to nonfatal intimate partner victimization only, which results in an unweighted sample size of 3,548.

## Measures

*Victim and offender relationship/intimate partner status.* A major focus in this research is how victimization risk differs across victim–offender relationships. Victim–offender relationship is measured in the NCVS by asking the respondent "What is the relationship of the offender to you?" The NCVS provides a multitude of victim and offender relationship categories, which we recoded into four meaningful categories: intimates, family, friends, and strangers.[1] A major concern in this research is how victimization risk differs by intimate partner status. We define an intimate partner as a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend, and intimate relationships include both heterosexual and same-sex relationships. While it is possible to identify which relationships are heterosexual and which are between persons of the same sex in the NCVS, we opted not to disaggregate the analyses using this variable given the relatively small number of same-sex relationships found in the data.[2] Note, too, while the NCVS allows disaggregation of current and former spouses, it does not do so for boy/girlfriends.

Victims' marital status in the NCVS is measured using five categories: never married, married, widowed, divorced, and separated. Marital categories correspond to respondents' status at the time of the interview, not necessarily when the victimization occurred. The survey does not ascertain if the respondent's marital status changed between the *time of the victimization* and the subsequent survey. Though we present information for all five categories, much of our analyses focus on comparisons among married, divorced, and separated respondents. Those who had never married and who were widowed were often represented in such small numbers as to not provide reliable estimates.

*Geographic area.* Parts of the analyses compare estimates of violence among women living in three geographic areas: urban, suburban, and rural areas. These geographic areas are determined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and based on Metropolitan Areas (MAs). OMB classifies areas into three groups based on their relationship to an MA: central city, outside central city, and nonmetropolitan area.[3] In line with extant research focused on geographic regions using data collected by federal statistical agencies, we utilize the more common language of urban, suburban, and rural areas (Duhart, 2000).

*Nonfatal violence.* As is common, overall nonfatal violence was operationalized by combining measures of attempted and completed rape/sexual assault, robbery, aggravated

assault, and simple assault. In the NCVS, neither the victim, field representative, nor the researcher determines that a crime has occurred or identifies the type of crime committed. Instead, using a variety of incident characteristics in the survey, a computer algorithm makes both these determinations. Moreover, standard NCVS definitions of violent victimization are employed. Rape is defined as forced sexual intercourse that includes psychological coercion and physical force, including heterosexual and same-sex rape, as well as rapes committed against males and females. Attempted rape includes verbal threats of rape. Sexual assault is distinct from rape or attempted rape and consists of incidents involving attacks or attempted attacks generally associated with unwanted sexual contact between victims and offenders. Sexual assaults may or may not involve force and include behaviors such as grabbing, fondling, and verbal threats.

Robbery constitutes property or cash taken directly from a person by use or threat of force, with or without a weapon, and with or without injury. Robbery is not commonly examined in studies of intimate violence against women, but robbery and burglary often accompany stranger rape (Scully & Marolla, 2005). Furthermore, a growing body of knowledge on the economic abuse of women shows that many men coerce their female partners to hand them their paychecks, so that they will not have any money for themselves (Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, & Greeson, 2008; Hofeller, 1982).

Aggravated assault is defined as an actual or attempted attack with a weapon, regardless of whether an injury resulted, or an attack or attempted attack without a weapon when serious injury results. Finally, simple assault involves an attack without a weapon resulting in either minor injury such as a bruise, cut, scrape, or scratch, or no injury.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Contingency table analyses are used to examine variations in violence across intimate partner status categories and geographic areas. These comparisons offer information on whether differences found between estimates are statistically different or equivalent. Still, using NCVS data in contingency tables requires special attention. Not only are NCVS estimates subject to sampling error, but additional concerns exist because the data come from a complex methodology utilizing clusters. Thus, it is inappropriate to utilize analytic techniques that assume a simple random sample because they may underestimate the standard errors and result in incorrect inferences about statistical significance.

To account for this, all comparisons of estimates using NCVS data presented here are tested using specialized formulae created by the Census Bureau that take into account the complex NCVS sample. These tests use generalized variance function constant parameters to calculate variance estimates, standard errors, and confidence intervals. Given this, caution is warranted when comparing victimization estimates not explicitly discussed in the findings. What may appear to be a large difference between estimates may not be statistically different. In contrast, seemingly similar estimates may in fact be statistically different.

A second consideration is the calculation of a goodness of fit statistic. Because of the complex nature of the NCVS sample, this is done using STATA's survey-set commands. This approach generates a Pearson chi-square test of independence statistic that is corrected for the survey design based on the second-order correction and converted into an *F* statistic (Rao & Scott, 1984). All estimates and comparisons reported are based on data that have been weighted using the appropriate weights located on the data files.[4]

## *Advantages and Disadvantages of the NCVS*

There are several advantages of using the NCVS to compare intimate violence among urban, suburban, and rural females. First, the nationally representative data can be generalized to noninstitutionalized persons aged 12 or older. A second advantage is the NCVS' large sample size. Especially relevant to the research reported here is that the data include measures of the victim–offender relationship, marital status, and whether the victim lives in an urban, suburban, or rural area.

A third advantage is that NCVS data include crimes that are not reported to agents of social control, such as the police. Research indicates that violence that is reported and violence that is not reported differ greatly. For example, crimes involving the use of weapons and resulting in injuries are more likely to be reported to the police than harms deemed by many people to be minor, such as slaps or shoves (Bachman, 1994; Hart & Rennison, 2003). This is not to say, though, that all slaps or shoves are less injurious than acts involving the use of weapons. For example, a man's slap can break teeth and a shove could result in someone falling backward, hitting her head, and then suffering major head trauma or dying (DeKeseredy, 2011b; Smith, 1987). In fact, prior research indicates that simple assault, an allegedly less serious form of violence, is *more* likely to result in an injured victim than is aggravated assault (Simon, Mercy, & Perkins, 2001).

The NCVS has limitations germane to the purposes of this research. One frequently mentioned pitfall is that respondents must be a member of a noninstitutionalized housing unit or a group quarter to be eligible to participate. Thus, homeless people, crews of vessels, institutionalized people, and members of the armed forces living in military barracks are excluded from the NCVS sample. Second, the NCVS does not include data on fatal violence; however, this is not a problem, given that homicide is a relatively rare form of crime. Actually, fatal violence makes up less than 0.01% of all violent crime in the United States (Catalano, 2006).

Finally, while the NCVS gathers information on crimes not reported to the police, many acts of violence against women may not be revealed because the NCVS is presented to respondents as a crime survey. Unless women clearly label hurtful behaviors as "criminal" in their minds, they tend not to report them on a survey of criminal behavior (Koss, 1996; Schwartz, 2000). Indeed, many women who experience what the law defines as rape do not label their assaults as such or even as a form of victimization (Littleton & Henderson, 2009; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999). By comparison, when surveys are not operationalized in the context of criminal assault and victimization, there are major reporting differences (Fisher, 2009). Mihalic and Elliott (1997)

found that up to 83% of the marital violence incidents reported in surveys of family behavior are not reported in contexts where the emphasis is on criminal victimization. Thus, most large-scale representative sample surveys of violence against women that are not contextualized as crime surveys elicit much higher figures (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011).

Nevertheless, all violence against women surveys suffer from underreporting. As Smith (1987) puts it, "Obtaining accurate estimates of the extent of woman abuse in the population at large remains perhaps the biggest methodological challenge in survey research on this topic" (p. 185). In addition to not defining what happened to them as crime in the context of filling out a crime survey, there are many reasons why abused women might not disclose violent incidents. These include embarrassment, fear of reprisal, and memory error (Kennedy & Dutton, 1989; Smith, 1987, 1994). Underreporting can also come from the reluctance or inability to recall traumatic incidents and the belief that violent assaults are too trivial or inconsequential to mention (DeKeseredy, 1995; Smith, 1994; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1981). These problems are difficult to overcome and are not likely to be eliminated in the near future. However, there are examples of effective attempts to minimize these sources of underreporting (see DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Schwartz, 2000; Smith, 1987), but it is beyond the scope of this article to review and evaluate them.

## Results

Table 1 indicates differences in the distribution of violence in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Focusing on rural females, findings show that the highest percentage of violent victimization against rural females is committed by a friend or an acquaintance (44.1%). This is statistically greater than the next most common form of violence for females in rural areas: intimate violence (25.2%). Finally, a statistically greater percentage of rural females are violently victimized by an intimate than by a stranger (22.1%) or a family member (8.6%). These findings contrast greatly with urban and suburban females, who are more likely to be victimized by a stranger or a friend than by an intimate partner.

Comparing victimization *across* geographic areas demonstrates that a higher percentage of rural females are victims of intimate violence than urban and suburban females ($p < .05$).[5] Specifically, 25.2% of all violence against women in rural areas is perpetrated by an intimate partner. In contrast, 19.2% of violence directed toward urban females and 21.0% of violence directed toward suburban females are committed by an intimate.

Table 2 provides percentages of females by geographic areas who experience specific types of intimate violence. Focusing on rural females only, findings show that a higher percentage of females in rural areas are victimized by a boy/girlfriend than by a spouse or an ex-spouse (12.6%, 9.0%, and 3.6%, respectively). And findings show that a higher percentage of rural females are victims of intimate violence by a spouse than by an ex-spouse. A comparison across geographic areas indicates that females in rural areas are victims of intimate violence by a spouse and an ex-spouse at percentages

**Table 1.** Percentages of Nonfatal Violence Against Women by Victim–Offender Relationship and Geographic Area.

| Victim–offender relationship | Urban | Suburban | Rural |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intimate partners | 19.2% (*n* = 1,237) | 21.0% (*n* = 1,711) | 25.2% (*n* = 600) |
| Family member | 6.6% (*n* = 427) | 7.5% (*n* = 595) | 8.6% (*n* = 210) |
| Friend/acquaintance | 36.1% (*n* = 2,310) | 39.1% (*n* = 3,099) | 44.1% (*n* = 1,062) |
| Stranger | 38.2% (*n* = 2,515) | 32.3% (*n* = 2,624) | 22.1% (*n* = 530) |
| Total | 100.0% (*n* = 6,489) | 100.0% (*n* = 8,029) | 100.0% (*n* = 2,402) |

*Note.* Total unweighted $n$ = 16,920. Unweighted sample sizes for each cell are in parentheses. 1992-2005 NCVS data. Design-based $F(4.94, 1610.46) = 17.7957$, $p = .0000$. NCVS = National Crime Victimization Survey.

**Table 2.** Percentages of Nonfatal Violence Against Women by Intimate Partner Status and Geographic Area.

| Type of intimate relationship | Urban | Suburban | Rural |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total intimate partners | 19.2% (*n* = 1,237) | 21.0% (*n* = 1,711) | 25.2% (*n* = 600) |
| (1) Spouse | 4.9% (*n* = 328) | 7.6% (*n* = 667) | 9.0% (*n* = 216) |
| (2) Ex-spouse | 2.3% (*n* = 153) | 3.0% (*n* = 250) | 3.6% (*n* = 93) |
| (3) Boyfriend/girlfriend | 12.0% (*n* = 756) | 10.5% (*n* = 794) | 12.6% (*n* = 291) |

*Note.* Total unweighted $n$ = 3,548. Unweighted sample sizes for each cell in parentheses. 1992-2005 NCVS data. Design-based $F(3.58, 1145.50) = 10.3088$, $p = .0000$. NCVS = National Crime Victimization Survey.

greater than females in urban areas. Similar percentages of females are victimized by a spouse and an ex-spouse in rural and suburban areas. With regard to boy/girlfriends, equal percentages of females are victimized in the three geographic areas.

We turn now to our hypothesis that females in rural areas, regardless of their intimate partner relationship status, are at higher risk of experiencing intimate violence than are similarly situated urban and suburban females. To investigate this, we compared rates of violent victimization (per 1,000 females) across the three geographic areas. Results shown in Table 3 provide mixed support for our hypothesis and indicate that this relationship is more complex than implied by the hypothesis. First, a comparison of intimate partner victimization rates indicates that urban females are victims of overall intimate violence at rates greater than suburban and rural females (7.46, 5.79, and 6.33 per 1,000, respectively). Findings also indicate that females in rural areas are victims of overall intimate violence at rates statistically equal to females in suburban areas (6.33 and 5.79 per 1,000, respectively).

While informative, a presentation of aggregated intimate violence may mask differences among more specific intimate relationship statuses. We next turn to examining differences in rates among the specific intimate partner statuses. We hypothesized that rural females are victimized at rates higher than urban and suburban females. Table 4

**Table 3.** Rates Per 1,000 of Nonfatal Violence Against Women by Victim–Offender Relationship and Geographic Area.

| Victim–offender relationship | Urban | Suburban | Rural |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intimate partners | 7.46 (*n* = 1,237) | 5.79 (*n* = 1,711) | 6.33 (*n* = 600) |
| Family member | 2.55 (*n* = 427) | 2.06 (*n* = 595) | 2.17 (*n* = 210) |
| Friend/acquaintance | 14.01 (*n* = 2,310) | 10.77 (*n* = 3,099) | 11.06 (*n* = 1,062) |
| Stranger | 14.82 (*n* = 2,515) | 8.90 (*n* = 2,624) | 5.55 (*n* = 530) |
| Total | 38.84 (*n* = 6,489) | 27.51 (*n* = 8,029) | 25.10 (*n* = 2,402) |

*Note.* Total unweighted *n* = 16,920. Unweighted sample sizes for each cell are in parentheses. 1992-2005 NCVS data. NCVS = National Crime Victimization Survey.

**Table 4.** Rates Per 1,000 of Nonfatal Violence Against Women by Intimate Partner Status and Geographic Area.

| Type of Intimate relationship | Urban | Suburban | Rural |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total intimate partners | 7.46 (*n* = 1,237) | 5.79 (*n* = 1,711) | 6.63 (*n* = 600) |
| (1) Spouse | 1.91 (*n* = 328) | 2.09 (*n* = 667) | 2.27 (*n* = 216) |
| (2) Ex-spouse | 0.89 (*n* = 153) | 0.81 (*n* = 250) | 0.90 (*n* = 93) |
| (3) Boyfriend/girlfriend | 4.66 (*n* = 756) | 2.88 (*n* = 794) | 3.15 (*n* = 291) |

*Note.* Total unweighted *n* = 3,548. Unweighted sample sizes for each cell in parentheses. 1992-2005 NCVS data. NCVS = National Crime Victimization Survey.

offers no support for this hypothesis. Results show that spousal violence rates are statistically equal in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Findings also show that ex-spousal violence rates are statistically equal in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The only statistical difference measured emerged for violence committed by current or former boy/girlfriends: Current or former boy/girlfriend violence rates are greater in urban areas than they are in suburban or rural areas. These rates are statistically equal in suburban and rural areas.

As indicated in Table 5, marital status is an important consideration when examining the relationship between intimate victimization and geographic area. A higher percentage of divorced females in rural areas compared with similar urban and suburban females are victims of *intimate violence* (26.6% and 23.3%, respectively). And a higher percentage of divorced suburban females compared to similar urban females are victims of intimate violence.

The same relationship is found for separated females: Separated rural females are victims of intimate violence at higher percentages than are separated urban and suburban females. Table 5 also shows that a higher percentage of suburban divorced females are victims of intimate violence than are urban divorced females.

Table 6 presents the risk of intimate victimization using rates per 1,000. Findings indicate that the rate of intimate victimization among married females is statistically equal across geographic areas. However, startling and significant differences are

**Table 5.** Percentages of Intimate Partner Violence in Geographic Areas by Female Survivor's Marital Status.

| Victim's marital status | Urban | Suburban | Rural |
|---|---|---|---|
| Never married | 47.7% (*n* = 556) | 34.2% (*n*=531) | 30.5% (*n* = 167) |
| Married | 10.2% (*n* = 136) | 17.5% (*n* = 324) | 14.9% (*n* = 102) |
| Widowed | 0.8% (*n* = 11) | 1.0% (*n* = 18) | 0.8% (*n* = 3) |
| Divorced | 18.8% (*n* = 254) | 23.3% (*n* = 411) | 26.6% (*n* = 175) |
| Separated | 21.9% (*n* = 531) | 23.7% (*n* = 531) | 26.8% (*n* = 531) |

*Note.* Total unweighted $n$ = 3,548. Unweighted sample sizes for each cell in parentheses. 1992-2005 NCVS data. Design-based $F(8.64, 2765.23) = 5.3856$, $p = .0000$. NCVS = National Crime Victimization Survey.

**Table 6.** Rates Per 1,000 of Intimate Partner Violence, Female Survivor's Marital Status, and Geographic Area.

| Victim's marital status | Urban | Suburban | Rural |
|---|---|---|---|
| Never married | 9.95 (*n* = 556) | 7.61 (*n* = 531) | 8.37 (*n* = 167) |
| Married | 1.92 (*n* = 136) | 1.90 (*n* = 324) | 1.74 (*n* = 102) |
| Widowed | 0.62 (*n* = 11) | 0.63 (*n* = 18) | 0.45 (*n* = 3) |
| Divorced | 13.19 (*n* = 254) | 14.51 (*n* = 411) | 18.83 (*n* = 175) |
| Separated | 46.85 (*n* = 531) | 65.70 (*n* = 531) | 82.58 (*n* = 531) |

*Note.* Total unweighted $n$ = 3,548. Unweighted sample sizes for each cell in parentheses. 1992-2005 NCVS data. NCVS = National Crime Victimization Survey.

measured when considering rates of victimization among divorced and separated females. Turning first to divorced females, we find that intimate violence risk is significantly greater for rural females than urban females (18.8 and 13.2 per 1,000 divorced females, respectively). Results indicate that rural divorced females are victims of intimate violence at statistically higher rates than divorced suburban females when $p < .10$. At a $p < .05$ level, they are statistically equal. A similar relationship is measured when considering separated females: Rural separated females are victimized at rates significantly higher than their urban counterparts. Findings show that 82.6 separated females in rural areas per 1,000 are victimized by an intimate compared with 46.9 per 1,000 in urban areas. As noted for divorced females, results show that rural separated females are victims of intimate violence at statistically higher rates than separated suburban females when $p < .10$. At a $p < .05$ level, they are statistically equal.

Data presented in Table 6 are also consistent with previous studies showing that separated/divorced women are at much higher risk of being beaten, raped, and the like than are married women.[6] These findings, of course, are "not news to battered women" (Stark, 2007, p. 116). As Stark (2007) points out:

> Abused women are much less likely than the professionals whose help they seek to regard decisions about physical proximity as means to end abuse and much more likely to regard separation as a tactical maneuver that carries a calculated risk within the orbit circumscribed by assault or coercive control. The disjunction between what victims and outsiders expect from separation remains a major obstacle to effective intervention and communication in the field. (p. 116)

What is likely "news" to many people is that intimate violence is common in rural areas. There is a widespread assumption that little crime occurs in rural U.S. communities, an assumption heavily fueled by the media, lay conversations, and even criminological research, which typically focuses on urban lawbreaking (DeKeseredy, 2011a; Donnermeyer, Jobes, & Barclay, 2006). The statistics and comparisons reported here are, to the best of our knowledge, the first analyses of NCVS data on marital status variations in intimate violence against females in rural, suburban, and urban areas. These data also show that if separation and divorce are potentially dangerous events for women in urban and suburban areas, they are even more dangerous for women in rural areas.

These findings, however, need to be interpreted with caution for several reasons. First, the NCVS is unable to identify the experiences of women in cohabiting relationships, another group that is at very high risk of being assaulted by intimate partners.[7] For example, Brownridge and Halli's (2001) review of 14 studies reveals quite dramatic differences in violence rates obtained from married persons and cohabitors. In fact, they found that the rate of violence for cohabitors is typically twice that of married persons, but in some groups as great as four times higher. The severity of violence is also much worse for cohabiting women. Thus, it is possible that the intimate relationship status variations we uncovered would be different had data on common-law relationships be clearly identified in the NCVS. In addition, it is likely that the rates of separation/divorce violence, regardless of where they took place, would likely be higher if respondents were asked about their experiences with former cohabiting partners (DeKeseredy, Rogness, & Schwartz, 2004). Consider that Finkelhor and Yllo (1985) found that 23% of women in their sample who separated from cohabitors experienced forced sex, compared to 3% of married women. Moreover, 67% of the cohabiting women interviewed by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009) in rural Ohio stated that they were sexually assaulted when they stated that they wanted to leave their abusive relationships.

The rates of separation assault would likely be even higher if the NCVS captured the experiences of women who defy men's patriarchal control by emotionally separating from them. Emotional separation, a major predictor of a permanent end to a relationship, is a woman's denial or restriction of sexual relations and other intimate exchanges (Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1997). Emotionally exiting a relationship can be just as dangerous as physically or legally exiting one because it, too, increases the likelihood of male violence and sexual abuse (Block & DeKeseredy, 2007). For example, of the 100 sexually abused women who participated in McFarlane and Malecha's (2005) study, 22% reported an emotional separation before the first time they were sexually assaulted.

Another empirical issue that warrants attention is that, as is the case with other surveys, simply establishing through statistical means that separated and divorced women in rural communities and elsewhere report higher rates of violence than their married counterparts does not reveal whether abuse caused the termination of relationships or if it started during or after breakups (Block & DeKeseredy, 2007). Nevertheless, the connection between separation and divorce and violence against women is much more than a coincidence (Hardesty, 2002). To infer causality, however, data on the precise timing of assaults are necessary.

## Conclusion

The research described here adds to the growing evidence that crime is common in rural communities. Furthermore, NCVS data, despite their shortcomings, support previous empirical work showing that violence perpetrated against females by intimate partners is just as prevalent in rural areas as it is in urban communities (Bachman, 1994; Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Brownridge, 2009; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009; Websdale, 1998; Websdale & Johnson, 1995). However, if some women in urban communities are at higher risk than others, the same can be said about some rural women. Certainly, this is the case for separated and divorced women. Still, for reasons described previously, the NCVS data reported here underestimate the magnitude of separation/divorce assault, as they do for violence against women in other social groups and marital status categories.

What accounts for the higher rates of separation/divorce assault in rural communities? Given the relatively small amount of research on what Hogg and Carrington (2006) refer to as "gendered violence and the architecture of rural life" (p. 171), it is not surprising that less than a handful of theories have been crafted to explain this problem. Heavily influenced by perspectives offered by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1993, 2002), Ellis and DeKeseredy (1997), Hogg and Carrington (2006), and Wilson and Daly (1992), DeKeseredy et al. (2004) developed a feminist/male peer support model of separation/divorce sexual assault and DeKeseredy et al. (2007) crafted a rural masculinity crisis/male peer support model. While exploratory qualitative data derived from interviews with women provide some support for these theories, the next step is to create large- and small-scale representative sample surveys specifically designed to test them. Moreover, more data from men are needed. So far, all of the data on separation/divorce assault in rural communities and in other areas are derived from women. Of course, listening to women's voices is a necessary method of describing "a complex reality for which we have few names" (Mahoney, 1991, p. 41), but any type of woman abuse is best understood by examining the characteristics of men rather than women (Mahoney, Williams, & West, 2001).

Research on men is required because, as Scully (1990) notes, women cannot accurately reveal the reasons why men abuse them because "they don't share the reality of . . . violent men." Such insight is acquired through invading and critically examining the social constructions of abusive men (DeKeseredy et al., 2004). Furthermore, men's abuse of women is male behavior and thus "more fruitful efforts" to explain it should focus on

men (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). This is not to say, though, that we cannot learn much about the risk factors associated with rural separation/divorce assault by asking women about the men who assaulted them. In fact, all of the relevant research conducted so far has elicited data from female survivors on the characteristics of perpetrators and has identified key determinants such as patriarchal male peer support, the ideology of familial patriarchy, and men's consumption of pornography (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009).

Another new direction in empirical work is to examine differences among rural communities (Weisheit et al., 2006). Not all rural communities are alike, but the myth of rural homogeneity was a long-held assumption that hindered the development of rural crime research. It presumed that heterogeneity was a trait intrinsic to urban areas, that homogeneity was a trait characteristic of people within specific rural communities, and rural communities were similar (DeKeseredy et al., 2007). Therefore, as official statistics such as the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports show higher urban than rural crime rates, rural communities are presumed to be relatively crime free. Again, our research challenges this myth. So do scholars who, in recent years, assert that there are different types of rural communities and important variations between these communities in terms of issues related to crime (Barnett & Mencken, 2002; Donnermeyer et al., 2006; Jobes, Barclay, Weinand, & Donnermeyer, 2004; Lee, Maume, & Ousey, 2003; Osgood & Chambers, 2000; Spano & Nagy, 2005).

Tolerance of woman abuse by local law enforcement officials and members of the general population varies greatly between different kinds of rural areas (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2008; Gagne, 1992; Websdale, 1998). Tolerance has also varied over time, with evidence that at least a few rural law enforcement officials are more aware of the seriousness of the issue than in the past (Weisheit et al., 2006). The result of these space and time variations is an uneven distribution of community norms about woman abuse and both informal and formal assistance available to female survivors across rural communities (DeKeseredy et al., 2007). For example, some rural communities are taking strong effective steps to reduce violence against women, such as using media outreach, community visits, and training for advocates (Lewis, 2003). On the other hand, many abused women do not receive any support from their community (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2008).

As Weisheit et al. (2006) correctly point out:

> Much needs to be done to anticipate the needs and crime-related problems that will face rural America in the next few decades. Anticipating future problems, however, first requires a good understanding of the current state of affairs. Such an understanding is sorely lacking. (p. 180)

Undoubtedly, we need a better understanding of violence against women in rural communities. Even so, the NCVS data reported here and the data generated by other researchers (e.g., Websdale, 1998) do not obscure the fact that woman abuse in rural communities is a major social problem. Hopefully, this crime will soon cease to suffer from academic "selective inattention" and also receive more scrutiny from policy makers, the media, and the general public. Thus far, too much scholarly and government

emphasis has been placed on what happens in urban communities. Our goal has been to contribute to the process of producing findings that will help focus attention on gendered violence in America's heartland.

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## Notes

1. Intimates include current or former spouses, boyfriends, and girlfriends. Family includes parents or stepparents, own child or stepchildren, brother/sister, and other relatives. Friends include friends or ex-friends, roommates, boarders, schoolmates, neighbors, someone at work or a customer. Stranger is a person unknown to the victim.
2. For example, between 1993 and 1999, 2% of intimate violence against females was perpetrated by a female perpetrator and 10% of intimate violence against males was perpetrated by a male offender (Rennison, 2001).
3. See http://www.census.gov/geo/www/GARM/Ch13GARM.pdf, http://www.census.gov/population/www/metroareas/metrodef.html, and http://www.census.gov/population/www/estimates/metroarea.html for additional information.
4. For more information on NCVS weighting procedures, or the NCVS in general, see Rennison and Rand (2007).
5. Unless otherwise noted, all differences are based on <.05.
6. See DeKeseredy (2011b) and DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009) for in-depth reviews of these studies.
7. That is, the NCVS does collect victimization experiences of those who are and who are not cohabiting. It cannot in its current form, however, identify which individuals are and are not cohabiting and in common-law marriages. Any future redesign of the NCVS would benefit by the inclusion of these very important measures.

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